

14
DEATH, THE LAW OF LIFE.

A DISCOURSE,

DELIVERED ON THE SUNDAY MORNING AFTER THE

MURDER OF PRESIDENT LINCOLN,

IN THE MEETING-HOUSE OF THE

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH OF PHILADELPHIA,

April 16, 1865.

BY THE

REVEREND GEORGE DANA BOARDMAN,

PASTOR.

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DISCOURSE.

WHAT a day, or rather night, is this, my countrymen! How intolerable the burden that crushes us! What! Abraham Lincoln dead? The idol of his countrymen, the true, the pure, the good, the loving, the heroic, the great-souled father of his people dead, murdered, gone away from us forevermore? O God! We cannot bear it! How can I stand here with this great grief so fresh in my heart, and discourse to you about it? It seems almost like sacrilege to attempt it to-day. On another and more appropriate occasion, when my thoughts are calmer and more orderly, I will offer my tribute to him who lies on the nation's bier. This morning I ask you to pass from the darkened chamber of a personal grief into a broader and serener temple, where the quivering chords of our hearts may lose somewhat of this painful tenseness, and where considerations of a more general and impersonal nature may raise the soul to loftier and calmer heights. May the Father of consolation help us while we ponder those words of the Redeemer, which are recorded in the twenty-fourth verse of the twelfth chapter of the Gospel according to St. John:

“Verily, verily, I say unto you: except a corn of wheat

fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit."

I. Thoughtless or dull must that man's spirit be which does not feel a quickening influence in these spring days of vegetative activity. He need not visit some great farm, or forest, in order to be assured of the wonderful transformations going on in nature around him. If he have but a single tree growing by his window, or a single rose-bush, or a square foot of grass-plat in his yard, he may discover, if he will, evidences of an activity as intense and wonderful in its way as when a nation is engaged in the shock of arms. Look abroad to-day on the vegetable kingdom around you. What stupendous energies are at work, upheaving the soil, draining the underground reservoirs of a continent, throwing the whole atmosphere of earth into commotion, supplying the waste of animal expenditure by vegetable growth, and carrying on that sublime paradox of compensation in nature which preserves equilibrium by means of perturbations! But not only are great transformations going on. Observe, also, the intense *life* everywhere prevalent. All nature is instinct with the most vigorous vitality. An exuberance of vital force is everywhere exhibited, from the loftiest pine to the tiniest lichen. Behold the bursting seed, the protruding shoots, the opening leaves, the unfolding buds of spring! Whence all this abounding life? Next autumn you will put your hand to the sickle, and

reap the golden ears. But whence will come your glorious crop? Ah! the law of the harvest is *death*. "Except a kernel of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit." It is because the seeds you plant in spring are dying that your fields in autumn will be white to the harvest.

My heart is awed within me when I think
 Of the great miracle that still goes on,
 In silence, round me,—the perpetual work
 Of thy creation, finished, yet renewed
 Forever. * * * * *
 Lo! all grow old and die; but see again,
 How on the faltering footsteps of decay
 Youth presses,—ever gay and beautiful youth
 In all its beautiful forms. These lofty trees
 Wave not less proudly than their ancestors
 Moulder beneath them. * * *

Life mocks the idle hate
 Of his arch enemy Death,—yea, seats himself
 Upon the tyrant's throne,—the sepulchre,
 And of the triumphs of his ghastly foe
 Makes his own nourishment.

II. The like principle holds in the animal kingdom. The life of the body depends on the destruction of its own material. No part of an organism or living mechanism can act without wearing away. Every action of the organism, whether in motion that is voluntary or involuntary, whether in emotion or volition, involves attrition, the wasting away, the absolute loss and death of animal material. The processes of life are at the same time the processes of death. The condition, the law of physical life, is physical death.

This, then, is the grand law of life that prevails in the physical world, whether vegetable or animal. Death must precede life. Death is the source, or, rather, the means of life. The death of the seed is the law of the harvest. "Verily, verily, I say unto you, except a kernel of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit."

Now, this multiplication of the seed through its own death our Lord uses as a most significant parable and lesson. As in the physical world, so in the spiritual: *Death must precede Life*. Growth comes through decay; glory through disgrace; joy through woe; peace through war; victory through defeat; life through death.

III. Observe how this principle holds true of the Son of God Himself. He could not, as *the Son of Man*, become perfect except through suffering. In fact, this is the primary and very particular application of the parable of the kernel of wheat dying, as our Lord Himself set it forth. While discoursing in the temple on the Wednesday before He died, message was brought to Him that certain Greek proselytes were waiting in the outer court to see Him. They were Gentiles, who had given in adhesion to some of the tenets of Judaism. They had heard of His fame, and of the triumphal entry which He had just made into the City of the Great King. And now they themselves being in Jerusalem to attend the Passover, they wished to see the illustrious Stranger for themselves, and learn by personal acquaintance whether He were the Saviour their

own hearts so sighed for. Deeply moved by this touching request of these Gentile proselytes, our Lord accedes to their wish. In their hearing He reveals, by means of this exquisite similitude we are considering this morning, that Messiah's glory was to come through Messiah's shame; Messiah's triumph through Messiah's defeat; Messiah's throne through Messiah's grave. The kernel of wheat abideth alone, unless it decay and die. It is only by decaying and dying that it adds to itself, and brings forth fruit. Just here, men and brethren, does this death of the kernel stand forth as a most wonderful shadow of Christ's work. For the Son of Man died that He might rise again a spiritual harvest of regenerate humanity. So long as Jesus remained on earth without dying, the Divine life was confined to Himself: *He abided alone*. It was only when He cast off, in dying, the earthly integument, that liberty of growth became possible. And when, at length, the harvest time shall come, Jesus will be found, like the kernel of corn, which, having died, has passed through its stages, first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear, to be no longer "*alone*," but to have "*brought forth much fruit*." The people, whose sins He had borne on the accursed tree, will be gathered into the heavenly garner, as the mighty harvest of the travail of His soul. The heavenly seed was sown in the ground, and died, that it might evolve itself into a mighty increment, and display itself in the glorious blossom and fruitage of redeemed humanity. Verily, as He Himself said to the

Gentiles that sought His presence, the hour of His death was the hour of His life; the hour of His defeat in crucifixion the hour of His triumph in redemption.

IV. Observe, again, how this principle holds true of man in all the deeper aspects of his nature. If the Captain of our salvation could not be made perfect except through suffering, how can He lead forth His many sons unto glory, unless they, too, tread in the same path of sorrow and agony? Oh, no! It is a law just as universal and inexorable in the kingdom of moral growth as in that of vegetable, that the spirit, like the seed, shall die before it can live. Let no human being think he can gather in his heavenly harvest till he has passed through trial, disaster, and death. And, in fact, the very next words which our Lord utters, after delivering this parable of the dying kernel, and as if in explanation of it, are these: "He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal." In other words, man's spirit must undergo a certain sort of decay and dissolution, must pass through what the world calls ignominy and defeat, before it can be quickened into the new life, and enter on the fruitions of a bright eternity. Glance now at some illustrations of this principle as applied to man's spiritual nature.

1. Look, for instance, at the prime doctrine of Regeneration. What, in fact, is the great mystery of the New Birth but the decease of the spirit,—the old man dying, that it may rise again the new man and the

better? Ah! there are some of you present who know experimentally what this parable of the dying seed means as applied to the great fact of conversion. There was a time when you, dear child of God, died. There was a decay of earthly hopes and prospects, of earthly devices and methods of salvation; and such were the bitterness of your remorse, and the depth of your penitence, and the agony of your spirit, that, in very truth, in being born again, in being quickened by the vitalizing energies of the Holy Ghost, you passed through what may indeed be called the pangs of dissolution.

2. So, too, does our parable explain the meaning and the ministry of affliction. There must be a bruising of the spirit—a lacerating, tearing away of the tendrils that cling to earthly props—a blighting and decay of the fondest hopes and plans—an utter abasement of pride and self-confidence—a painful breaking down of the will—a dying agony of spirit, before the soul can multiply its powers into any glorious harvest. It is only when we are weak that we are strong. Oh, think it not strange, then, my friend, that you, who have tried to walk humbly before your God, have been called to pass through such fiery trials. Ask that mighty oak, which has triumphantly breasted the whirlwinds of centuries, how he became so colossal and strong; and he will answer you, that once he was but a little acorn, lying idle on the soil, and the heedless foot of a bounding deer tramped it beneath the sod; and then it decayed and died, and its greatness and its

glory date from its death. Think it not strange, then, that you should endure trial and sorrow, and die years before your body reaches the grave; for it is the law of the spiritual harvest. No man can become spiritually great till he has spiritually died. The *only* way to the heavenly crown is from the earthly cross.

V. The same principle is applicable to nations. So far as mortal penetration can go, God's *universal* method of governing is this: Growth through decay; victory through defeat; life through death. And nations are no exceptions. It is not possible that a nation should achieve true greatness except through the discipline of defeat, and the throes of a mortal agony. It is the law of growth and establishment. There are no Christians like those who have been tried in the fires of affliction. And there are no nations which attain such true majesty of character as those which successfully burst through the avenues of disaster and spiritual, heartfelt dissolution.

Here, then, in this terrific war, in the desolations of our homesteads, in the occasional disasters and humiliations of the battle-field, and specially in this crushing blow which fell on us yesterday morning, do I discover evidences of the Father's loving-kindness. For, I do not believe, what many persons seem to imagine, that *all* our disasters are *wholly* to be traced to human agency. Could we lift up the curtain which conceals God's plan of guiding this nation, I believe that we should discover that He had employed a system of providential arrests and clogs, which should hamper and sometimes sud-

denly balk some of our best-laid schemes. I believe this, not because our national history is an exception to God's general method of administering human affairs, but because it is in harmony with it. The observant reader, whether of biography or of history, must have been impressed with the fact that God not only governs the affairs of men and of nations, but also often advances their best interests by confounding their wisest counsels, and suddenly tripping up their most promising schemes. It is most unsagacious, then, to say the least of it, to conclude that every national disaster, whether in the cabinet, the Congress, or the field, is to be traced *solely* to human agency. To do this, is to take a practically atheistic view of the great campaign. No! God, as the Providential Disposer of incidents, can very easily find some method by which to defeat us, and yet we be utterly mistaken in assigning the cause of defeat. And this I believe He has repeatedly done in our national history, specially in the conduct of this war, our generals themselves being as much mistaken as to the source of the defeat as we were. And, however broad in statesmanship we may be, or energetic in purpose, or profound in strategy, or heroic in the field, I believe that God will continue, ever and anon, to balk suddenly, in some way for the present misunderstood by us, our most consummate schemes, till the national heart feels at its very core that the Lord God of Hosts is the real ruler of America, and that President, Secretary of State, general, soldier, citizen, is strong only as Almighty God

stoops down from His throne, and helps him to be strong. And this is the way our God is teaching us. Our wisest thinkers are but as blind men groping after light and an open way. And the blessed thing is that the dear God has taken our poor, stricken, pall-clad nation into His own hands, bringing the blind by a way that they knew not, leading them in paths that they have not known, hedging up their way with briers, making a wall that they should not find the paths, alluring them into the wilderness, that He may at last speak comfortably unto them, and open for them in the Valley of Achor a door of hope.

Glance, now, at some of the blessed fruits which the dying of the nation has already yielded.

1. See, for instance, how the calamities of this war have tended to reveal us unto ourselves. Prosperity is a miserable school for self-knowledge. But adversity has a wonderful self-revealing power. The nation understands itself a great deal better than it did four years ago. We have not the same overweening vanity that made us so ridiculous in the opening of this appalling struggle. Very different is the national feeling to-day from what it was on that eventful Sunday morning in July, 1861, when our army so recklessly and vain-gloriously marched to the field of Bull Run, and almost every paper in the North positively predicted an easy victory, which should decide beyond cavil or peradventure, the issue of the war. We understand ourselves better now. We are more humble. We feel more

keenly our dependence on God for the happy issue of the struggle. Hence, when victory perches on our banner, as when Richmond fell and Lee surrendered, instead of rending the air with our boastful and atheistic huzzas, as was our wont over our earlier successes, we now instinctively gather together in reverent prayer and adoration, and the song that swells on our lips, as was the case before Independence Hall and in Wall Street, is the Doxology to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Our growing self-knowledge, learned in the school of adversity, is gradually driving the nation nearer and nearer to Him "from whom all blessings flow." And self-knowledge is one of the grand elements of real greatness. The self-revealing power of suffering is making us humbler, and, therefore, greater. For he that humbleth himself shall be exalted. Thus does the dying seed unfold into the golden harvest.

2. Another blessed fruit of this desolating war, and specially of the awful tragedy which is ensanguining its final act, is, that it has thrown us out of the benumbing routine of stiffening habits and tendencies, thus limbering us afresh to the manifold purposes of Divine Providence. We need, specially as a young, growing nation, still in its formative stage, to be every little while powerfully agitated, lest we become paralyzed through sheer monotony of action and sentiment. Uninterrupted prosperity produces the same effect on nations that it does on individuals; it tends to stunt the growth, weaken the capacity, debase the nobility. Of all calami-

ties, considered as affecting those who have capacity for growth, nothing is more fatal than simple stagnation. It is a great blessing to be convulsed and dislodged, whenever our wheels have worn so deep as to preclude liberty of diversion. God's law for powers is progress; and progress can take place only at the cost of convulsions and throes. Every new crystallization implies a previous commotion and effervescence. Better for the human spirit all the commotions of change than the numb palsies of monotony.

Better men should perish, one by one, .
 Than that earth should stand at gaze, like Joshua's moon in Ajalon !
 Through the shadow of the globe we sweep into the younger day :
 Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay !

But aside from its being essential to progress, it is an admirable thing to have the national heart ever and anon profoundly stirred; for it is thus made sensitive to the quickening and plastic influences of the Spirit of God. Calamities tend to make the human spirit flexible, limbering and adjusting it to the movements of the Divine. Surveyed from this point of view, the arousal of the national sensibility is of inestimable value. It is good, and I say it in the presence of these sad, funereal emblems, that a great tide of pathos should ever and anon sweep over a people. In this view, the desolations and bereavements of this war, and, specially the awful calamity before which the nation now stands aghast, are, under God's providence, a perturbing, loosening force, knocking away the bolts that imprisoned the soul, and

letting into its opened chambers and corridors the winnowing, gladdening gales of the Spirit. Accordingly, I expect that, when the immediate, turbulent excitements of this assassination and of the war, as a whole, are over, a profound religious awakening will pervade the country. I confidently look for greater triumphs of Messiah than those which were won after the terrible financial commotions of 1857. The national heart has been touched and laid bare by the finger of Almighty God, and the lacerated organism will be sensitive to the Divine Breath. Brethren in Jesus! This is your hour with God! Be ye princes with Him, and prevail!

3. Still another fruit of this devastating scourge, is the development of the nation's true nobility. Never does a man know the force or grandeur that is in him, till some mighty calamity or passion has revealed his soul. Viewed in this light, war, terrible scourge as it is, has its gains as well as its losses. Oh, no! The nations cannot live, much less grow, without the severe, but quickening and unfolding discipline of this terrible thing. The nation's heart must die before it can blossom in beauty, or multiply its powers in harvest. And what a harvest of spiritual magnificence has the national suffering and death already yielded! What outbursts of generosity have there been! What floods of sacred, lofty sensibility have surged over the land! What splendors of heroism have lighted up the firmament, grandly illustrating (may I reverently say?) Jehovah's sublime law of vicarious suffering! Even the seed dies

vicariously in order to the harvest. What a magnificent hecatomb has been the nation's offering, not by compulsion, not in superstition, but in solemn, rational, heroic joy! This mighty army, not of conscripts, but to so very large extent, of volunteers, has not only offered itself; it has been silently offered by countless hidden hearts quite as heroic; by wives, mothers, sisters, lovers! Oh, I thank the Lord of heaven and earth, that He hath so woven the web of the nations as to permit the American people to set before the ages the grandest *human* illustration the world has ever witnessed of that sublime principle which seems to pervade the universe, and which lies as the very corner-stone of Redemption,—*Vicarious Sacrifice!*

4. I have been speaking of the application of this principle, *life through death*, to nations. Let me bring this point still nearer home, even to these bleeding hearts of ours that as yet refuse to be comforted. The richly kerneled and tasselled stalk springs from the death of the solitary seed. Even so, the nation's triumph and greatness may spring from Abraham Lincoln's death. Had he been permitted to live till the term of his great office had expired, and, afterwards, in a greenold age, to die amidst the tranquillities of his Illinois home, he would still have been the glorious nobleman that God crowned him in his birth; but he might have *abided alone*, fructifying into no national harvest. We should still have revered him, as we revere all of God's great ones; but no nation would have been born

of him. But when, beneath the sufferance of an inscrutable Providence, the assassin's bullet laid him low, the glorious seed died, that it might no longer abide alone, but *bring forth much fruit*. Even here, in the cause of Liberty, as in the cause of the Church, it shall be found that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Republic. Take courage, then, my countrymen: for even now I see springing from the tear-wet bier of Abraham Lincoln the green and tender blades which foretell the birth of an emancipated, united, triumphant, transfigured, immortal Republic. Even so, Father! For thus it seemed good in Thy sight!

